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PUBLIC DIALOGUE ESSENTIAL TO GOVERNANCE AND ECONOMIC REFORM, ACCORDING TO NDI PUBLIC OPINION RESEARCH

Tirana, Albania - Focus group research conducted by the National Democratic Institute (NDI) in December 2013 and released today shows the public mood as negative, shaped by poor economic conditions. Unemployment and corruption top citizen concerns. There is an undercurrent of cautious optimism for reform--if elected leaders reach out to citizens and engage them meaningfully in public policy decisions. The latter is a marked contrast to focus group research conducted in October 2012, which showed a near universal conviction that the country was headed in the wrong direction.

The research found that participants feel disconnected from elected representatives and party leaders, and called for them to deliver on their election promises. They said officials should listen to and communicate with citizens regularly to understand their concerns, and work more effectively across party lines to reach consensus on pressing economic and social problems.

The research found that citizens have a clear desire for a new style of politics and governance based on broad public consultation and participation, politician responsibility, and government accountability. Discussions were held in Tirana, Elbasan, Shkodër, Fier and Korçë.

In other key findings:

- Participants view corruption as widespread, leading to inefficiencies in public institutions, poor quality in public services, and limited opportunities for citizens in accessing employment, healthcare, and educational opportunities, among other needs.
- A majority of participants favors European Union (EU) integration. They perceive EU integration as a tool to improve monitoring of government performance and to strengthen the rule of law. They are aware that, with the privileges of EU membership, come responsibilities and obligations for both the government and citizens.
- Expectations of the new government and appraisal of its first initiatives are generally positive. Participants recognize that it may be too soon to judge the government performance as a whole, but raise some concrete measures they agree with in principle, including the closing of gambling sites and casinos; the demolition of illegally constructed buildings; the government's termination

- of waste importation; the introduction of progressive taxation; and a campaign to fight corruption.
- Participants distrust parliament, political parties, and the political process in general, and are skeptical that any political party is interested in solving problems that matter to citizens. Parties are seen as equally culpable. None in particular stands out as solution-oriented.
 - The majority of participants, regardless of age or gender, believe that there should be more women in politics. Women are perceived as more issue/policy-oriented, and their perspectives in solving problems contribute to more stable and longer term solutions.

The qualitative study seeks to provide Albania's major political parties and civil society leaders with objective information that will help enact reforms on issues of citizen concern.

The focus group research was conducted in partnership with IDRA Research & Consulting, and was made possible through the support of the National Endowment for Democracy.

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The National Democratic Institute is a non-profit, nonpartisan, nongovernmental organization supporting democratic institutions worldwide, through citizen participation, openness and accountability in government. More information is available at www.ndi.org